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Commentary

The expert's assessments regarding
the radical propaganda on social
media platforms of Central Asian
countries

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Currently, there is an alarming trend in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan associated with the intensification of radical propaganda on social networks. This negative trend raises serious concerns and requires closer attention from society and the authorities. Radical propaganda based on ideological and religious extremism is becoming more widespread in these regions. It is aimed at manipulating the masses, forming negative stereotypes and inciting ethnic hatred. Such attempts at manipulation and division only increase social tensions and threaten the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic groups. Despite the fact that the percentage of the population affected by such influence in Uzbekistan is small, the increasing number of radical channels seems to be a cause for concern.

One of the factors contributing to the spread of radical propaganda is the availability of modern information technologies and social networks. The Internet has become the main channel for the dissemination of extremist ideas and beliefs, which increases their impact on young people and inexperienced Internet users. The fight against such propaganda requires the joint efforts of society, the state and *the international expert community*, among others. In this regard, in March this year the webinar was organized with the participation of IAIS researcher Aziza Mukhammedova and Benjamin den Braber, head of the Open Data Intelligence Department of the Afghan Witness project. This webinar was aimed at sharing a methodology for monitoring social networks containing extremist content, as well as sharing the results of an analysis of the activities of such accounts and the dynamics of their propaganda in the Central Asian region.

Benjamin, in turn, shared his assessments regarding the spread of radical ideology in the countries of the region such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which, according to the monitoring results, are most susceptible to this influence.

B. Braber: Speaking of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the main radical influence they are exposed to is propaganda from ISIS-Khorasan (hereinafter ISIS-K). In this case, monitoring often reveals an omen of what they are going to do. Therefore, quite often we see an extensive campaign directed, for example, against China, which last time preceded the attack on a hotel in Kabul, which belongs to the Chinese. So if you look closely at the propaganda, you can really try to identify exactly what they are interested in and maybe some of the possible goals in the future. However, in this case, it is also necessary to view the official

news sources. For example, recently we drew attention to an alleged terrorist attack in Tajikistan, a news story about which was published only in one Tajik media, at that time there were no statements, no propaganda and no prerequisites on the ISIS-X channels. So, with this information, we can try to do a little analysis. Is this really true? Is this really an ISKP attack or is the media just claiming it, blaming ISIS-K.

As for the propaganda of ISIS-K in the Tajik and Uzbek media, there is a slight difference in the content and frequency of the propaganda distributed. So, in the beginning, after the Taliban came to power, we noted a significant increase in the number of Taliban raids on cells. The Taliban claimed to be eliminating propaganda cells. At that time, we also noticed that some ISIS-K channels confirmed this. Thus, by 2023, the amount of propaganda on the networks had significantly decreased, but after that we witnessed a large-scale diversification of all propaganda. If until 2023 there were one or two main channels that published Uzbek and Tajik propaganda, then there was a massive increase in the number of people who did this, and to this day they include many accounts on social networks. Thus, it was no longer one or two publications, but many different posts. The purpose of propaganda in both Uzbek and Tajik media is about the same – it is anti-government propaganda, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, anti-Israeli propaganda, and so on.

If we look at Uzbek content in general, we will notice that there are many differences between the Uzbek and Tajik segments. Uzbek content is really focused on Gaza, as well as on training its fighters. Therefore, they use a lot of Islamic content, as well as publish entire brochures on how to wage jihad in countries such as Syria or Afghanistan. A lot of content from other small Uzbek cells is also being distributed. For example, the IMU, which has been active for a long time and is very critical of the local Uzbek government, publishing cases when men in Uzbekistan are detained by the police and shave off their beards, thereby trying to expose the government of Uzbekistan as "unbelievers".

Returning to ISIS, it is important to note that for some time Uzbek channels have been actively campaigning to attack Jewish and Israeli interests in Uzbekistan. So, they published images of synagogues in Uzbekistan, images of flights arriving in Uzbekistan from Israel. They did not call for active attacks on these places, but shared all the details, as if trying to incite people to commit attacks.

From the author: A separate common theme in Uzbek banned content is the new direction of the call for "Media jihad". In this case, accounts actively maintain separate headings in which they teach the recruited audience how to spread propaganda on the Internet using a VPN, how to protect themselves on the Internet in order not to be caught. A separate area is also entire channels devoted to general military tactics (how to clean and use an AK-47 assault rifle and other weapons, as well as extensive material on how to make bombs, and even mentions of chemical weapons)

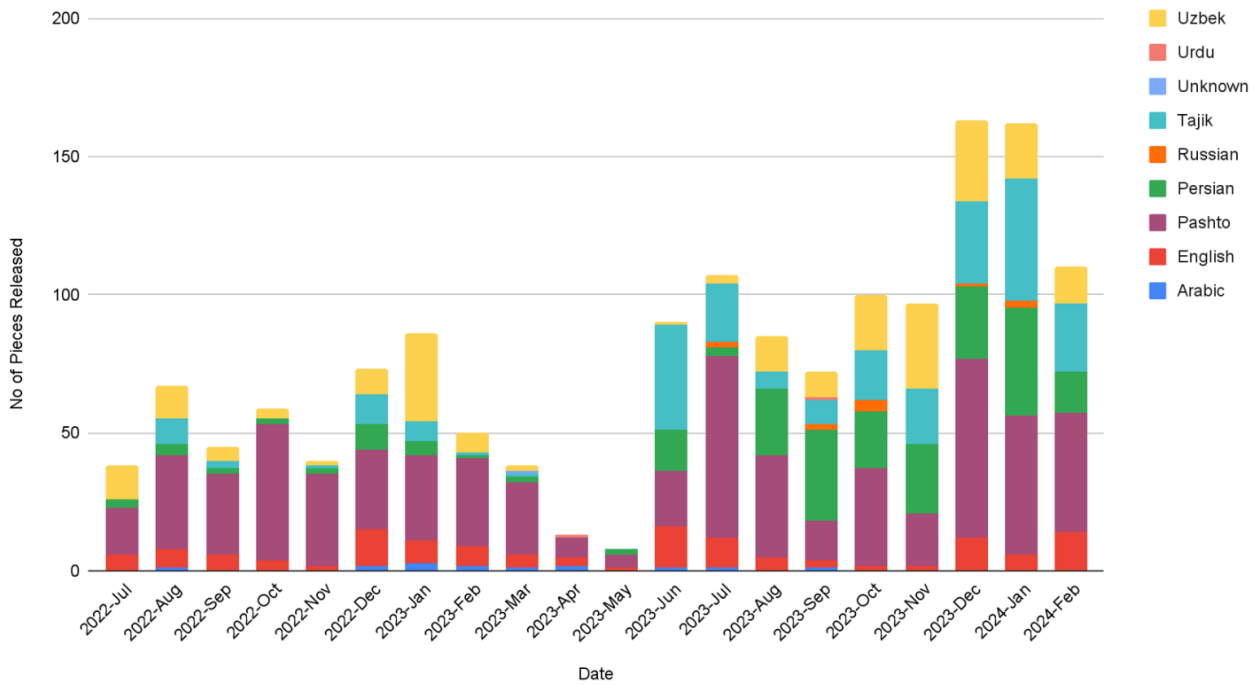
Tajik propaganda, Ben continues, has a different focus. Today we see that the majority of suicide bombers, not only in Afghanistan, but also attackers in other areas and in Europe, are associated with ISIS-K, while most of these people are Tajiks, which suggests Tajik propaganda is more active, among which audio and video recordings are the most common format. Moreover, if you listen to their emphasis on these recordings, you can assume that often they are from the south of Tajikistan, a region bordering Afghanistan.

Another interesting detail that can be noticed in the Tajik content is that almost all videos about their fighters or cells were filmed indoors in such a way that it is impossible to determine their location, although in some cases the videos were shot outdoors and in large areas (most likely in the north of Afghanistan in the Badakhshan region, where they appear to have more freedom).

As for the target audience, we regularly note the propaganda focused on women, urging them to send their husbands and children to Jihad and take proper care of their Mujahideen loved ones. Another target audience is migrant workers in Russia, as a lot of criticism has been published recently regarding Russian policy regarding migrants (videos of migrants being beaten by Russian police officers, etc.).

Recently, we have also seen a surge in activity in support of the Taliban, both in Tajikistan and at least in the Tajik and Uzbek segments. Moreover, we see that most of the propaganda that Ansarullah spreads completely coincides with what the Afghan Taliban claim. They are also very anti-ISIS-K.

Overview of distribution of propaganda pieces by language



Source: Afghan Witness

Thus, from the expert’s assessments we can conclude that it is important to carry out educational work aimed at developing critical thinking and information literacy among the population. It is also necessary to strengthen the legal framework and take measures to curb the activities of extremist groups and their propagandists. Special attention should be paid to young people, who are the main target audience of radical propaganda. The creation of alternative platforms and programs aimed at involving young people in constructive activities helps to prevent their exposure to ideological extremist influences.



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